

This winter has been good to gardeners. With January temperatures in the forties the ground is not frozen. This has allowed me to continue harvesting sun-chokes and all the memories that accompany them. *Helianthus tuberosus*, also called Jerusalem artichoke, is a beautiful, tasty, and easy to grow sunflower. This native perennial is grown for its tubers, not seeds. My great grandmother, Mrs. Ruth Henderson, kept a patch right outside the back door. Helping her dig Jerusalem artichokes was a favorite childhood activity.



Neither from Jerusalem nor an artichoke, this common name is misleading. *H. tuberosus* was among the first American plants to be shipped and grown in Europe. Italians dubbed them “girasole” meaning the flowers turned towards the sun, a common trait in many sunflower species.

It was thought that the cooked tubers tasted similar to the “bottom of an artichoke”. Over time American vernacular changed “girasole artichoke” to “Jerusalem artichoke”. “Sun-choke” is a more recent and casual common name; its curtness preferred by grocers and gardeners alike.

Sun-chokes not only supply food for gardeners, but also copious amounts of nectar for insects that visit the bright yellow flowers in autumn. When blooming, these tall stout plants are often crowded with life, like a ripe fig tree in the Amazon. Butterflies, bees, moths, and candleflies load up on nectar before the onset of cold weather.



Praying mantises patrol the patch stealthily attacking unsuspecting insects. I sometimes want to rescue the swallowtails and monarchs as they are being eaten alive. But to avoid harming or discouraging the cool and uncommon mantises, I just say a quick blessing for the butterfly and resume my role as the watcher (always observing, never interfering).

The flowers of autumn are beautiful; the tubers of winter are not. They resemble warty fingerling potatoes, but there is an important difference. Sun-chokes are **starch-free** and their carbohydrates are not converted to sugar in the body. The diet conscious and diabetic can eat them without concern. (I use them like starch-credits. If I have sun-chokes instead of potatoes, then eating those biscuits or muffins won't be so bad.) The one potential drawback for the self-conscious is the amazing ability of sun-chokes to increase the amount and potency of flatulence. (Not a problem if you are an uncle. As a matter of fact, it can provide hysterical moments of laughter for five year-old nieces and nephews.)

Grandmother Ruth would pickle and can the tubers (that generation was proudly self-reliant) for use in relishes and other dishes. Sadly, those methods and recipes are gone, but sun-chokes have a myriad of uses.

I never expected to dig sun-chokes in January without a pick-axe and parka. Gardening in this weather has me hankering for a fresh-from-the-garden salad. I know it's early; but If this moderate winter continues, I am thinking about sowing my lettuces, arugula, and spinach next week. This warm winter might be an anomaly, but the idea of four season edible gardening In Chicago is delectable.



In salads, the raw tubers serve as an alternative to water chestnuts. Roasted sun-choke chips are a tasty breakfast side to a mushroom omelet with wheat toast. In fact cooked tubers can be used as a starch-free substitute for any potato dish.